



The Coral Project: Exploring Abusive Behaviours in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender Relationships

Interim Report: Executive Summary

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Introduction

This paper summarises interim findings from the first UK study exploring the abusive behaviours of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGB and/or T) people in their intimate relationships. The study was funded by the ESRC and conducted between October 2012-September 2014. A steering group provided advice and feedback throughout the project and included: Respect, The Dyn Project (Safer Wales), Scottish Transgender Alliance, LGBT Youth Scotland, the North East Domestic Abuse Project, Broken Rainbow, National Offender Management Service, Equation and Professor Nicole Westmarland from Durham University.

The Coral Project¹ aimed to:

- explore similarities and differences across sexuality and gender of those who enact 'abusive' behaviours in LGB and/or T and heterosexual relationships;
- do this with those who have enacted 'abusive' behaviours as well as practitioners who provide interventions for predominantly heterosexual male perpetrators;
- explore what methods might work best to elicit data to address these aims;
- share key findings with key stakeholders to develop best practice guidance for work with those who use 'abusive' behaviours in LGBT relationships.

¹ Coral is a precious stone believed to guard against violence and restore harmony

Background

There is no longer any doubt that domestic violence and abuse (DVA) takes place in LGB and/or T relationships. The UK government has responded to the research and activism about this issue by changing the law on rape to include that men can be victim/survivors; including in the definition of DVA and the current government's *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls* strategy recognition that DVA can take place regardless of gender or sexuality; including same-sex relationships in specific measures addressing DVA; and funding for specific provision to address the needs of LGB and/or T victim/survivors.

Given this growing awareness about the existence and needs of LGB and/or T victim/survivors, it is increasingly obvious that there remains a gap in knowledge, policy and practice with respect to those who are abusive in LGB and/or T relationships. Yet, increasing perpetrator accountability and rehabilitating perpetrators of DVA is integral to the *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Action Plan* (Home Office, 2011). It is this agenda that the Coral Project addressed.

One of the challenges for this work is that LGB and/or T perpetrators of DVA are rarely visible in court-mandated or voluntary perpetrator provision. To conduct this research, the approach was taken to invite participants from the general population of LGB and/or T people to take part in a research project exploring 'what you do when things go wrong' in their relationships making it unique in its attempt to engage with people who might have been abusive in

their relationships. Because of this the term 'abusive' appears in inverted commas to signify that focusing on behaviours is insufficient to make sense of what has happened in any particular relationship: context, motives and impact are all required to provide a fuller picture of the relationship before it can be defined as domestically violent and abusive.²

The approach we take to addressing the aims of the Coral Project is a sociological one underpinned by:

1. Recognition that a range of public stories about love and relationships, LGBT lives as well as DVA circulate in society that individuals and couples draw on to inform and make sense of their own beliefs, expectations and behaviours in their intimate lives (Donovan and Hester, 2014).
2. Feminist theory about intersectionality and social positioning within society which points to the ways in which individuals' multiple intersecting social identities (e.g. their gender, 'race', social class, disability, sexuality, faith), social positions and resulting social power impact on experiences, understandings, and responses to DVA (Donovan and Hester, 2014).
3. A critical approach to binaries of victim/perpetrator and power/powerlessness, especially if these are applied in static, fixed ways; instead drawing attention to how

²In this research the Home Office definition of domestic violence and abuse was adopted: <https://www.gov.uk/domestic-violence-and-abuse#domestic-violence-and-abuse-new-definition>

power can shift and be perceived in different ways especially by victim/survivors but also across different relationships (Ristock, 2002). Johnson (2006) also reminds us that violence and abuse takes different forms; for example, intimate terrorism and situational couple violence.

4. A departure from the psychological concept of 'minority stress' which individualises and pathologises the effects of belonging to a sexual or gender minority group, which has in turn been studied in relation to LGBT DVA (e.g. Mendoza, 2011). Instead, a broader sociological understanding of how exclusion from the expectation that everyone is heterosexual and falls within the (heterosexual) male/female gender binary has multiple implications for LGB and/or T people's social interactions, sense of safety and freedom, everyday relationship practices, and feelings about their sexuality and/or gender identity.

The Coral Project Research

In order to achieve the aims of the Coral Project a multi-method approach was chosen:

1. A UK-wide survey of LGB and/or T people and their experiences of intimate relationships re (917 respondents, with 872 usable questionnaires); survey respondents were aged between 16-over 70 years, more women (including trans women) than men (54%³ and 41% respectively),

³ Figures have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

- 11% had ever identified as trans, 4% identified as gender queer/non-binary gender; 32% identified as gay man, 23% as lesbian, 15% as gay woman and 14% as bisexual. In addition, 6% of the sample self-defined as queer, 4% as heterosexual, and 1% as homosexual; a third identified as having a disability; over a third had either a degree or a postgraduate degree, however, the largest group only earned between £12-22,999, with women earning more than men in all earning groups except the highest two.
2. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 36 volunteers from the survey (in total, 17 men (including one trans man) 14 of whom identified as gay, one bi, and one pansexual; and 19 women (including two trans women) 12 of whom identified as lesbian, one gay woman, three bisexual, two queer and/or pansexual and one asexual);
 3. Interviews with twenty-three practitioners working on voluntary perpetrator programmes in the third sector (n=12); and with practitioners working on court-mandated programmes within probation or the prison service (n=11);
 4. Eight focus groups with practitioners (n=53) working within sex and relationship education/support, youth work, working with men, probation, domestic violence sector, voluntary sector, LGBT counselling/therapy, generic relationship counselling/therapy.

Key findings

1. Survey respondents self-reported whether they had used each of 69 potentially 'abusive' emotional, physical, sexual and financial behaviours in their current/last and previous relationships
 - a. Just over half – 57% - said they had used at least one 'abusive' behaviour in the last 12 months of their current or last relationship or ever in a same-sex, bisexual and/or trans relationship.
 - b. Emotional behaviours were most commonly reported (38%) – with 'accused them of being unfaithful', 'regularly insulted or put them down' and 'frightened them with things you said or did' being most common.
 - c. Sexual behaviours were the next most commonly reported category (36%), of which 'withholding affection' was most common.
 - d. Seventeen per cent of respondents reported using at least one physical behaviour and 20 per cent, at least one financial behaviour, in the last 12 months of their current or last same-sex, bisexual and/or trans relationship.
 - e. These findings do not however tell us that all of the respondents who have used these behaviours are 'abusive' people: survey data giving statistics on prevalence of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) need to be interpreted cautiously and are of limited use without parallel attention to context, motives and

impacts to establish a more accurate picture of the meaning of such behaviours in any particular relationship.

2. Survey respondents were also asked to report on their experiences of partners using the same 'abusive' behaviours in both the last 12 months of their current/last relationship or a previous relationship.
 - a. Sixty-six per cent of the survey respondents had experienced at least one 'abusive' behaviour in the last 12 months of their current or last relationship;
 - b. Understanding the context of the use and experience different physical, emotional, sexual and/or financial behaviours is crucial to making sense of whether or not a relationship constitutes DVA;
 - c. Mapping behaviours experienced against impacts found that just under 11% of the sample had experience of what Johnson (2006) terms 'intimate terrorism'; the most serious, chronic form of DVA, characterised by extreme fear and coercive control;
 - d. Further analysis will be conducted to gain insights into how people might move between victim/survivor and perpetrator roles in both the same relationship and within their wider relationship history.

The following analysis is located around three initial themes:

- Experiences of homo/bi/transphobia and their implications for relationship experiences and the potential use of 'abusive' behaviours
- Making sense of 'abusive' behaviours in LGB and/or T Relationships
- Help-seeking

With these themes in mind, and drawing on different phases of the research, the interim conclusions are as follows:

Experiences of homo/bi/transphobia and their implications for relationship experiences and the potential use of 'abusive' behaviours:

1. High proportions of the sample reported homo/bi/transphobic victimisation; for example, 86% had experienced some form of homo/bi/transphobia, perpetrated in the majority of cases by strangers, followed next by family.
 - a. Participants indicated that dealing with the disclosure and concealment of their sexuality and/or gender identity was stressful, particularly in relation to strangers/the public;
 - b. Those who reported homo/bi/transphobic victimisation were more likely to report both experiencing and enacting at least one abusive behaviour, and significantly more likely if they had experienced hate crime or homo/bi/transphobic bullying; however, we are not able to make any claims about the causal relationship between 'minority

stress' and using abusive behaviours;

- c. Homo/bi/transphobic victimisation and discrimination have implications both for how LGB and/or T live their day-to-day intimate relationships and help-seeking.

Making sense of 'abusive' behaviours in LGB and/or T relationships

Three groups of findings emerge here:

Owning up' to what? Reading between the lines of accounts of 'abusive' behaviours by LGB and/or T people

2. Contrary to research on abusive heterosexual men which suggests that they minimise deny and blame the victim/survivor for violence and abuse they have used (e.g. Anderson and Umberson, 2001), in this study interview participants were open, honest and concerned about their use of behaviours. Two factors might explain this: that they are talking about past relationship and have had time to reflect on them and their behaviours within them; and/or that they have been victimised in those relationships but do not identify their experiences as DVA. Sampling issues are also significant, given that existing research on heterosexual male perpetrators draws mostly on convicted perpetrators.

Identifying what kind of relationship violence it is: Contexts for the use of 'abusive' behaviours

3. Whilst LGB and/or T interviewees were purposively selected based on who, in the survey, had used behaviours that could be perceived as 'abusive', the majority were doing so in retaliation, revenge and/or self-defence within a relationship that was either controlling or a 'problem relationship'. This does not negate the harm that these behaviours can cause to both the recipient and the relationship, but it does mean that a one-size-fits-all intervention will not be effective.

Who's got the power?: More complex configurations of power in intimate same-sex, bisexual and/or trans relationships

4. There was evidence that some relationship experiences challenge 'obvious' understandings of how social power might operate in intimate relationships; for example, men in relationships with much younger men being victimised as a result of being positioned as 'younger' in terms of outness and where already being out is used as social capital.

Is this abuse?: Recognising DVA and distinguishing between abusive relationships from 'bad' or 'problem' relationships

5. The public story about DVA – namely that DVA is a heterosexual problem of larger, stronger male partners using physical violence towards weaker female partners (Donovan and Hester 2011) – leads to difficulties for LGB and/or T people in

recognising DVA in their relationships and non-use of mainstream and/or specialist DVA agencies. This can also engender situations where LGB and/or T people do not recognise that they are being victimised, but instead present at agencies with concerns about their own behaviour.

6. There are particular difficulties in making distinctions between abusive relationships and 'problem' relationships. This is partly because practitioners and LGB and/or T people have varying views about what abusive relationships look like – with the public story of DVA making physical abuse more visible and obscuring coercive control.

Help-seeking

7. Only a minority of survey respondents who have used 'abusive' behaviours have sought help in relation to this:
 - a. Most survey respondents who responded to a question asking whether they had sought help for the behaviours they had used said they had not: the most common reasons given for not doing so were 'it wasn't serious enough to seek help', 'private matter/nobody else's business' and 'felt too ashamed';
 - b. Trans-identified respondents were much more likely to select 'Didn't think they would understand' or 'didn't think they could help' or 'because of my gender identity';
 - c. The survey findings suggest that some LGB and/or T people recognise the need to make changes to how they behave in their relationships and a substantial

minority identify that they have problems with control, jealousy, anger and trust.

8. The findings of this study have implications not only for practitioners who provide DVA perpetrator interventions, but have widened to concern multiple practice settings including for youth work, sex and relationships education and, in particular, both private and NHS counsellors/therapists:
 - a. When LGB and/or T relationships are going wrong this study suggests that informal and individualised sources of help such as counselling/therapy are preferred; this can lead to relationship experiences being cast as an individual problem rather than reflecting a wider social problem;
 - b. Focus group discussions amongst different practitioner groups suggest each approach LGB and/or T relationships, DVA, and 'problem' relationships in different ways reflecting their professional qualifications, expertise and experience;
 - c. Practitioner discussions also reveal the influence of public stories about DVA and adult intimacy that might cause barriers to providing an inclusive service to LGB and/T people seeking help;
 - d. Whilst practitioners showed awareness and sympathy with how living in a homo/bi/transphobic society might negatively impact on LGB and/or T relationship behaviours, it is important not to

focus on sexuality and /or gender identity as ‘the problem’ when LGB and/or T people seek help for their experiences/behaviour in relationships.

9. Interview participants were generally keen to have the opportunity to seek help from an LGBT-specific service, expecting a greater level of understanding, insight into LGB and/or T relationships and acceptance of their sexuality and/or gender identity. A minority cited a preference for using mainstream services, either out of convenience, a belief that these services are or should be inclusive and non-judgmental, or a concern that LGBT-specific services would over-emphasise their gender and/or sexuality.

Perpetrator interventions

10. Bespoke interventions for LGB and/or T partners are almost non-existent within both voluntary/community-based services or within the criminal justice system.
11. Within the probation and prison services there are no accredited perpetrator interventions to which convicted LGB and/or T perpetrators can be mandated, although some probation practitioners had developed adapted versions of the IDAP one-to-one programme.
12. Most voluntary/community-based perpetrator services are only open to heterosexual men who have used DVA against female partners.
13. The dearth of specialist provision has significant implications for opportunities to rehabilitate, reduce risk and hold perpetrators accountable in line with government policy.

14. Most practitioners believed that there are both similarities and differences between abusive LGB and/or T people and heterosexual men who abuse
 - a. Similarities led most to argue that existing perpetrator programmes could be adapted by changing materials used to reflect LGB and/or T, rather than heterosexual, relationships and heterosexual masculinity; and run on the same model of group work with co-facilitators;
 - b. Differences led most to argue that factors combining under the umbrella of ‘minority’ stress might have a negative impact at both psychological and social levels within LGB and/or T relationships.
15. Practitioners currently providing interventions for predominantly heterosexual male perpetrators recognise the need to develop interventions for LGB and/or T perpetrators, but there are a number of constraining issues:
 - a. Low numbers of LGB and/or T perpetrators visible to practitioners and the criminal justice system make it difficult to make an argument for resources to enable such developments. The current ‘austerity’ spending cuts exacerbate this since many practitioners referred to the cuts having to be made for services to victim/survivors of DVA. In fact, one agency that participated in the practitioner phase of the research closed some months afterwards due to lack of funding;

- b. In the absence of resources to develop group work, one-to-one interventions have been developed either in an ad hoc way or in two instances as a strategy. Numbers using them were too low for any comment to be had about them;
- c. All practitioners advocated for more training to be made available about LGB and/or T relationships as well as how DVA operates in LGB and/or T relationships.

16. Finally, whilst this study has focused on same-sex, bisexual and/or trans relationships, many of the findings would resonate with heterosexual relationships too. Hence, it is important to emphasise that the issues discussed are not exclusively LGB and/or T issues.

Recommendations

In light of the preliminary conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Training and awareness about DVA in LGB and/or T relationships is needed amongst practitioners working in a range of practice settings including, but not restricted to, specialist domestic violence services, the police, providers of court-mandated accredited programmes for DVA offenders, formal and informal sex and relationship educators, counsellors and therapists.
2. Given the preferred use of counsellors/therapists by participants in this study who had used violence against a partner in retaliation, revenge or self-defence, both private and NHS

counsellors and therapist and mental health service providers should be prioritised as practitioner groups in urgent need of training and awareness raising about DVA in LGB and/or T relationships.

3. Training should focus on:
 - a. information about DVA in LGB and/or T relationships;
 - b. how LGB and/or T people might present accounts of themselves as having been 'abusive' in a relationship but that this should be carefully unpacked with them in order to establish the context, meanings, motives and impact of these behaviours;
 - c. skilling practitioners up on identifying the different ways in which the operation of social power might be confounded in abusive LGB and/or T relationships;
 - d. case studies to provide working examples of the different kinds of violence that can occur in intimate LGB and/or T relationships as well as to illustrate the sometimes different ways that social power or power accruing from being an experienced LGB and/or T person can be used to victimise an LGB and/or T partner;
 - e. caution about being seen to problematise the sexuality and/or gender identity of a service user seeking help about an intimate relationship;
 - f. how to make a service/agency inclusive for LGB and/or T service users;

- g. how to encourage the take-up of available services by local LGB and/or T people and to do so before escalation occurs.
4. A review of provision for convicted LGB and/or T DVA offenders is needed:
 - a. to develop skills at pre-sentence report stage to identify LGB and/or T offenders;
 - b. to address the current discriminatory position of there being no accredited programmes for LGB and/or T DVA offenders, including, if necessary, reconsidering the criteria for parole for indeterminate-sentenced offenders until equivalent opportunities for attending an accredited programme exists;
 - c. to provide training and awareness about LGB and/or T relationships and DVA in LGB and/or T relationships in order to more accurately identify the victim/survivor and perpetrator and the particular ways in which power can operate in LGB and/or T relationships;
 - d. to consider how an accredited programme for LGB and/or T offenders of DVA could be provided, taking into account issues such as confidentiality and safety of LGB and/or T offenders.
 5. Young LGB and/or T people need to be provided with opportunities for formal and informal sex and relationship education, including how to identify abusive relationships and how and where to seek help. Role models for LGB and/or T relationships that are of 'ordinary' lives and relationships lived in non-abusive ways should be promoted to provide different kinds of public stories to influence relationship behaviours and norms.
 6. Given the importance of friends as a source of help for people experiencing and/or using 'abusive' relationships, work is needed with LGB and/or T communities to promote friendship norms of support, and circulate information both about how to recognise an abusive relationship and what sources of help are available.
 7. Funding should be made available to pilot and evaluate a voluntary, community based, tailor-made intervention for abusive LGB and/or T people. This should involve:
 - a. the development of a tool to identify the range of ways that violence can be used in a relationship with a focus on how power is operating within the relationship and a risk and needs assessment in order to carefully identify and, if necessary, divert referrals to an appropriate alternative service (e.g. for victims/survivors);
 - b. testing the feasibility of a group and/or one-to-one individual depending on resourcing, demand and geography;
 - c. taking into account issues such as confidentiality and safety for LGB and/or T participants, as well as logistical issues regarding whether –

- for group work – to have mixed LGBT groups or to separate groups by gender and/or sexuality, as well as consideration to the gender and/or sexuality of the facilitators;
- d. partnership working with appropriate partner agencies for mutual support and skill/knowledge sharing to develop the intervention.
 - e. time to undertake outreach to LGB and/or T communities and networks in order to promote this new intervention and encourage take-up.
8. Online resources for both LGB and/or T people and practitioners should be developed to provide information and guidance on same-sex, bisexual and/or trans relationships where violence and abuse are occurring. These could be hosted by a range of organisations known to provide ‘relationships’ services.
 9. ‘Relationships’ services across sectors should specifically invite LGB and/or T people to take up their services and ensure that their public face (literature, webpages, flyers, imagery) includes LGB and/or T people and their lives within them.

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